

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Maimonides quotes both of these system-wide explanations in his Guide for the Perplexed (3:31) and they become central to his broader understanding of the nature of Torah. Based on Chapter six he asserts that Torah laws are “for our good” – in order to help us to build good, healthy, wise societies. Based on Chapter four he goes further and says that Torah law will help us build a society that non-Jews will see and hold in high-esteem.

On some level it seems ludicrous that non-Jews would see us keeping to our strange, particularistic way of life and say how clever we are. Sure, they might applaud our commitment, saying: “Look at these people who have managed to maintain tradition and values in the face of adversity!” But do they really, *can they really*, appreciate our traditions themselves?

For Maimonides, the answer is that they must - it is not enough to applaud our maintenance of tradition while finding the traditional practices themselves odd, distasteful, or even disturbing. In Maimonides’ view, the non-Jewish observer is an important arbiter of the moral health of our tradition. In essence, a test of whether we are understanding and living the Torah correctly is whether non-Jews see us and our communities as living models of wisdom and virtue.

Revealed religions like Judaism have a “particularising tendency” in which they claim that only an insider, one steeped in traditional doctrine and practice, can truly “get it.” This can quickly turn religious particularism into a deeply unhealthy solipsism. Maimonides’ insistence on “moral translatability” - the ability of members of one culture to perceive and appreciate the morality of another culture - has the potential to carve out realms of mutual comprehension and to overcome these tendencies. Translatability, and continued discourse between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, has the potential to save us from ourselves, as the moral climate and intuition of the wider world acts as a check on our grosser religious instincts.

A healthy Judaism should not require elaborate justifications or apologetics. Lived correctly, it should pass a more simple test: It is making me more thoughtful and kind? Is it helping me understand, and be attuned with, the world? Is it making a positive difference in the life of others?

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Va'et-hannan

Shabbat Nahamu

July 28, 2018 | 16 Av 5778

Annual | Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11 (Etz Hayim p. 1005-1031; Hertz p. 755-776)
Triennial | Deuteronomy 5:1-6:25 (Etz Hayim p. 1015-1029; Hertz p. 765-774)
Haftarah | Isaiah 40:1-26 (Etz Hayim p. 1032-1036; Hertz p. 776-779)

D'var Torah: Getting Religion Right

Rabbi Joel Levy, Rosh Yeshiva & Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

There are a few places in the Torah where reasons are given for particular mitzvot. The commandment is stated and then the Torah says, “for/because” (כי /ki) or “in order that” (למען /l'ma'an) and proceeds to explain its meaning and/or purpose. These explanations can look backwards for some sort of historical justification or forwards for an intended outcome. For example, Exodus 13:9 looks back to explain why we wrap tefillin: “for (ki) with a strong hand hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt” (כי בְּיָד חֲזָקָה, הוֹצֵאתָ אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם). Leviticus 23:42-43, on the other hand, looks forward to explain why we dwell in Sukkot: “in order that (l'ma'an) your generations may know that I made the children of Israel to dwell in booths” (למען יֵדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַסֹּכוֹת הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל).

In the book of Deuteronomy, presented as Moses’ personal reflections looking back on the sweep of Israelite history, we begin to find broader explanations for the whole “mitzva project” itself. Our parasha, Va'et-hannan, offers two of those broad explanations. Verse 4:6 says: “Observe therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, who will hear all these statutes and shall say: 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'" And verse 6:24 says: “And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as it is at this day.”

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(Dvar Torah continued on back page...)

D'var Haftarah: An Eternal Promise

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This Shabbat marks the first Shabbat after the fast of Tisha b'Av - the fast in which we mourn the destruction of the two Temples and the loss of Jewish nationhood for close to two thousand years. This long period had its trials and tribulations as well as its triumphs of the spirit. Still, our national identity was never lost, despite circumstances which were cause for despair. In order to shore up our people's spirits, the sages set up a series of seven special haftaroth (Shiva d'nehamta – the seven haftarot of consolation) to be read on the Shabbatot until Rosh Hashanah to strengthen faith and increase hope for the future.

How does one reclaim optimism in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation? Isaiah understood that the human condition leaves little room for relief. Life is ephemeral. Promises made die with one who makes them. People are fickle and unreliable. One moment they are friends, the next, foes. Similarly, how many generations have lived and died without ever having a sense that national redemption was possible, that the dream of coming home might come true? Facing this depressing reality, Isaiah reminded his audience that not everything in life rests on that which is temporal: "Indeed, man is but grass: grass withers and fades, but the word of the Lord is always fulfilled." (40:7-8)

This seventh century parable based on this verse builds on the prophet's message: "A parable. To what can this be compared? To a king who had a close friend, to whom he promised that if he would accompany him on a trip that he would give him a gift. The friend came but died along the way. The king said to his friend's son: 'Even though your father has died, I fully intend to carry out my promise and give you the gift, so come and take it. Who is the king in this parable? God. And who is the beloved friend? Avraham. The Holy One Blessed be He said: 'Come with me,' and He promised him the land of Canaan. Avraham died and so did Yitzhak and Yaakov. But, the Holy One Blessed be He said to Moshe: 'Even though your ancestors have died, still, I made a promise to them and I intend to keep it, as it says: 'But the word of the Lord stands forever.'" (adapted from Bemidbar Rabbah 16:3)

This midrash reminds us that the patriarchs and matriarchs did not live to see the promises made them come to fruition. Yet, the promises made to them were ultimately answered. Their faith and hope were warranted. We are asked to share in this faith. Why? Because the word of the Lord stands forever. This idea should be our anchor and strength.

Parashat Va'et-hannan Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this Parasha Moshe begins his epic speech about the Mitzvot, which we will follow for many Parashot to come. Moshe will deliver commandments; some new and some renewed, as well as speak about them in general. Keep your eyes open for the 10 Commandments, as well as the first passage of Shema.

- 1) Moshe pleads to enter the land of Israel, but is rebuffed by God and told not to raise the issue again (3:22-29). Why do you think he shares this very personal moment with the people?
- 2) Moshe tells the people that he taught them the Mitzvot that God commanded him so that they will keep them in the land they are about to receive. His reason: Other nations will consider that Israel's wisdom. What about the Mitzvot might make outsiders have such a reaction?
- 3) The so called Ten Commandments that are repeated in 5:6-17 include the Mitzvah of Shabbat. Not only does a person from Bnai Israel have to refrain from work on Shabbat, so do the sojourner, the (non-Jewish) slaves and even the animals. Why do you think that these groups have to observe this Mitzvah? (The animals can hardly be commanded!)
- 4) During the revelation at Sinai the people saw that a person can be spoken to by God, and live. Nonetheless, they believe they will die if they continue to hear God's voice (5:20-23). How can you explain their contradictory statements?
- 5) In the first section of the Shema (6:4-9) we are commanded to love the LORD our God. How can we be commanded about our feelings? How do you understand that commandment?

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